

Global health and disaster medicine: Is it time to add more to the medical curriculum?

Benson Chen

Trainee Intern
Auckland School of Medicine
University of Auckland

Internationally, many universities have realised the importance of teaching undergraduate medical students about international or global health issues. As citizens living in an increasingly globalised world, it is important that we as medical students and future doctors have a good understanding of the healthcare challenges faced by clinicians around the world. Additionally recent events, internationally and locally, have led to a call for greater emphasis on education and training in disaster medicine and public health emergencies.

Is there enough space in the medical curriculum to teach these topics? Is it important for medical graduates to know how to manage patients with developing world diseases or manage victims following a disaster?

The field broadly labelled 'global health' or 'developing world medicine' looks at the healthcare challenges faced by clinicians internationally and aims to provide solutions. Global health, at the population level, is concerned with improving health outcomes and reducing disparities across states. It is an increasingly coordinated field of medicine that is underpinned by a set of quantifiable targets articulated in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

In 2000, the United Nations adopted the MDGs, as a series of targets to be achieved by 2015. The eight goals represent the main challenges currently facing our world. They are:

1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2. Achieve universal primary education
3. Promote gender equality and empower women
4. Reduce child mortality
5. Improve maternal health
6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
7. Ensure environmental sustainability
8. Secure a global partnership for development

As can be seen, some of the MDGs directly relate to health and healthcare provision. However, it can easily be argued that all affect people's health and wellbeing.

The final MDG indicates the well-accepted importance of cooperation and collaboration between developed and developing countries in tackling the challenges faced. With this in mind, many universities in developed countries have incorporated dedicated global health teaching into the undergraduate medical curriculum. Some progress has been made towards replicating this approach in New Zealand; however further enhancements are necessary if we want to produce medical graduates well-equipped to face global health challenges.

Nevertheless, there is already a lot that medical students can do. Global health groups have been established at each campus in the country with

Mariam Parwaiz

5th Year Medical Student
Christchurch School of Medicine
University of Otago

links to other global health initiatives such as the Medical Aid Abroad Programme and Fiji Village Project, as well as opportunities to volunteer locally and internationally. Many Trainee Interns have undertaken their medical elective in a developing country to gain first-hand knowledge and experience in dealing with the challenges people face.

Additionally, preparing medical graduates well-equipped to face disasters and their aftermath is essential. Recent disasters such as the Christchurch earthquakes remind us that disasters can happen anywhere, at anytime, and to anyone. Doctors and medical students who are conversant in the language of these fields are often the best equipped to manage and respond to disaster situations and their aftermath. The general public have an expectation that the medical profession are able to lead and manage in matters of health following a disaster.

Unlike global health teaching, where topics can appear isolated and specific, many aspects of disaster medicine and management are already being taught to medical students, such as infectious disease control and public health promotion. Teaching in disciplines such as occupational medicine and wilderness medicine compliment these, and provide transferable skills and knowledge.

However, what makes disaster medicine training fundamentally different from what is presently taught in the medical curriculum is its focus on taking preventive and preparatory measures, and on how to use creative and innovative approaches in solving disaster challenges. Preparing graduates who are able to think laterally and solve healthcare challenges, in whatever context, is crucial to the future of healthcare delivery in this country whether a disaster occurs or not.

So how can students contribute? The Christchurch earthquake in February this year shows just how powerful students can be in responding to a disaster. Immediately following earthquake, medical students at the Christchurch School of Medicine quickly organised themselves into groups to provide assistance and support where required. The response showed how effective students can be; and also highlights the importance of communication and organisation, in particular the use of social networking tools such as Facebook. Although many students did not receive any disaster management training prior to the earthquake, fundamentals learnt in medical school, such as showing empathy towards stressed and stricken patients and assisting healthcare staff where needed, proved to be invaluable.

Although global health and disaster medicine do not feature in the medical curriculum as modules or core knowledge competencies in their own right, the need to prepare medical graduates competent in these areas is becoming increasingly important.

We hope this issue of the New Zealand Medical Student Journal gives you a taste of the challenges and opportunities out there, encourages you to think creatively and critically about solutions to the wider problems in our world and, to quote Gandhi, "be the change you want to see in the world".

Should global health form a compulsory component of undergraduate medical curricula?

Karina McHardy

Department of Public Health
University of Oxford
Oxford, United Kingdom

Dr Karina McHardy is a Doctor of Philosophy candidate and global health tutor at the University of Oxford. She holds a Masters in Global Health and is currently a Clarendon, Wolfson and Department of Public Health Scholar. Her interests include childhood obesity, medical education, physician migration and clinical leadership. Karina has represented the University of Oxford in trampolining and dancsport.

Whilst global health is now increasingly being introduced as a post-graduate subject or indeed an entire degree, it remains conspicuously absent on the undergraduate radar.

Global health is an exciting and emerging field with proven potential for substantial, broad-reaching impact. Four of the eight Millennium Development Goals have a clear, direct relationship to global health, with many remaining goals displaying an indisputable link to this expansive area. Mammoth sums of money are invested annually in global health initiatives and this outlay has been rewarded by dramatic progress in multiple areas. Major organisations and foundations, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have made longer-term commitments to addressing global health issues in a comprehensive, evidence-based fashion. Global health is not new, however it is visionary, interesting, relevant, challenging, topical and – in its own way – trendy as heck. Quite simply, global health is where it's at. Why, therefore, does it not currently feature as a compulsory subject for New Zealand (NZ) medical students? How is it possible that some students would likely struggle to articulate what is even meant by 'global health'?

Acknowledging the importance of global health is not a difficult task. As it turns out, developing arguments in favour of routinely teaching global health to undergraduate medical students is also remarkably straightforward.

Firstly, such teaching provides students with a more comprehensive perspective – on life, on health, and on healthcare (including healthcare systems). Armed with this, healthcare practitioners are better equipped to practice in the context of a globalised world. Good doctors offer more than sound medical knowledge: they require an appreciation of the health issues and beliefs of different cultures and societies. Global health teaching has a significant role to play here. Global health is also inextricably intertwined with the socio-economic determinants of health – something that demands attention in 21st century medicine.

Doctors must demonstrate reasonable understanding of the global burden of disease. How can we treat effectively if we are not aware of the extent of the problem, what causes the problem, or even where it can be found? Yes, knowledge of the local situation is vital, but we need to consider whether this should be taught at the exclusion of the broader health picture. This wider-reaching perspective may, in fact, be required to provide the most relevant local care.

New Zealand is blessed with an international population and, if we are to adequately serve our communities, our knowledge of disease and medicine must reflect this diversity. We also house a relatively mobile population. Consequently, our demography and disease burden will change. This article

will not discuss the relative merits of overseas experience and I shall steer clear of the controversial issue of physician migration. However, irrespective of your view or professional intentions, there is no escaping the fact that many local graduates will practice in a non-NZ setting at some point in their clinical careers. To be competitive in a highly international market, you need to know something of the system in which you elect to function. Global health teaching facilitates an understanding of key transferable principles which can be applied no matter the scene. Let us suit up before heading into the battle. Location of practice aside, we also see that global health issues impact on all of us. Time and time again, we are reminded that health threats and disease neither recognise nor respect geographic boundaries (Fukushima, anyone?). Yet, by continuing to neglect the changing trends in global health issues, we currently teach as though this is the case. We cannot afford to be this naïve.

Naturally, there is the pragmatic realisation that we cannot cover everything in just six short years and competition for medical lecture time has always been strong (and contentious, and political, and...). However, it seems that many conditions that feature in top ten global health lists appear only fleetingly in the standard lecture set. There were significant gaps in my knowledge about malaria, HIV/AIDS, diarrhoeal illnesses, under nutrition, oral health and even TB at the time of graduation. This was not a consequence of insufficient study, and I know I was not alone in my relative ignorance around some major global health conditions. In fact, it barely occurred to me that I should know more about these conditions. Without realising it, I left medical school almost believing that these conditions were not particularly relevant to my future career; simply since they do not reflect significant health challenges in NZ. But, can it be that some of the leading causes of death in this world are simply not pertinent to certain doctors – depending on where they train? Do we have an ethical obligation as (current or future) healthcare practitioners to be aware of the major issues affecting a notable proportion of individuals around the world? When we are considering the really big stuff, it is not sufficient to say, "We just didn't know".

We should be questioning why medical curricula are structured so that we learn more about obscure, 'House'-style metabolic or embryological conditions than we do about, say, vitamin A deficiency in children. Why is it that many students would struggle to talk for 60 seconds straight about malaria? The 'House' stuff might make us feel dead smart, but the latter conditions more accurately reflect what the world actually sees. Will we feel quite so smart if we miss or mis-manage a condition that features so prominently on the international scene?

A basic knowledge of the epidemiology of major global health conditions, together with a working understanding of the principal obstacles and challenges facing those striving toward the improvement of the health